

(12) INTERNATIONAL APPLICATION PUBLISHED UNDER THE PATENT COOPERATION TREATY (PCT)

(19) World Intellectual Property Organization
International Bureau



(43) International Publication Date
20 March 2003 (20.03.2003)

PCT

(10) International Publication Number
WO 03/023677 A1

(51) International Patent Classification⁷: **G06F 17/60**

(21) International Application Number: **PCT/US01/28001**

(22) International Filing Date:
7 September 2001 (07.09.2001)

(25) Filing Language: **English**

(26) Publication Language: **English**

(71) Applicant (for all designated States except US): **UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE [US/US]; 475 L'Enfant Plaza, S.W., Room 6344, Washington, DC 20260-1135 (US).**

(72) Inventor; and

(75) Inventor/Applicant (for US only): **ALDSTADT, Harry [US/US]; 13201 Windy Leaf Court, Woodbridge, VA 22192 (US).**

(74) Agents: **GARRETT, Arthur, S. et al.; Finnegan, Henderson, Farabow Garrett & Dunner, L.L.P., 1300 I Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20005-3315 (US).**

(81) Designated States (national): AE, AG, AL, AM, AT, AU, AZ, BA, BB, BG, BR, BY, BZ, CA, CH, CN, CO, CR, CU, CZ, DE, DK, DM, DZ, EC, EE, ES, FI, GB, GD, GE, GH, GM, HR, HU, ID, IL, IN, IS, JP, KE, KG, KP, KR, KZ, LC, LK, LR, LS, LT, LU, LV, MA, MD, MG, MK, MN, MW, MX, MZ, NO, NZ, PH, PL, PT, RO, RU, SD, SE, SG, SI, SK, SL, TJ, TM, TR, TT, TZ, UA, UG, US, UZ, VN, YU, ZA, ZW.

(84) Designated States (regional): ARIPO patent (GH, GM, KE, LS, MW, MZ, SD, SL, SZ, TZ, UG, ZW), Eurasian patent (AM, AZ, BY, KG, KZ, MD, RU, TJ, TM), European patent (AT, BE, CH, CY, DE, DK, ES, FI, FR, GB, GR, IE, IT, LU, MC, NL, PT, SE, TR), OAPI patent (BF, BJ, CF, CG, CI, CM, GA, GN, GQ, GW, ML, MR, NE, SN, TD, TG).

Published:

— with international search report

For two-letter codes and other abbreviations, refer to the "Guidance Notes on Codes and Abbreviations" appearing at the beginning of each regular issue of the PCT Gazette.

WO 03/023677 A1

(54) Title: ITEM TRACKING AND ANTICIPATED DELIVERY CONFIRMATION SYSTEM METHOD

(57) Abstract: This disclosure describes systems and methods for electronically tracking information. The tracking information may include arrival information regarding an arrival of the item and processing information regarding processing of the item.

THIS PAGE BLANK (USPTO)

THIS PAGE BLANK (USPTO)

ITEM TRACKING AND ANTICIPATED DELIVERY
CONFIRMATION SYSTEM AND METHOD

DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

Field of the Invention

[001] The present invention relates to a method and system for tracking and delivering items being shipped. More particularly, the invention relates to a method and system for electronically tracking items in a processing and delivery system and providing a customer access to item tracking information.

Background of the Invention

[002] An ongoing goal of shipping companies that ship items from a sender to a recipient is to provide customers with valuable information regarding the items being shipped. It is therefore desirable to enable customers to access processing information regarding incoming and outgoing items. Particularly, it is desirable to inform customers when a shipping company takes possession of an item and to provide customers with a unique identification for monitoring the item.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[003] In accordance with the invention, a method for providing tracking information for an item being shipped, associated with a shipping customer may include receiving anticipated arrival information from the customer regarding an anticipated arrival of the item. The anticipated arrival information may include a predetermined shipment identification identifying an anticipated shipment associated with the item, and a predetermined customer identification identifying the customer. The method may further include receiving a first shipment with a first shipment identification, comparing the first shipment identification to the predetermined shipment identification, and notifying the customer with confirmed arrival information when the first shipment identification matches the predetermined shipment identification.

[004] It is to be understood that both the foregoing general description and the following detailed description are exemplary and explanatory only and are not restrictive of the invention, as claimed.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[005] The accompanying drawings, which are incorporated in and constitute a part of this specification, illustrate embodiments of the invention and together with the description, serve to explain the principles of the invention. In the drawings:

[006] Fig. 1 is a block diagram illustrating a customer submitting an item in a conventional shipping system;

[007] Fig. 2 is a block diagram illustrating a first bar code;

[008] Fig. 3 is a diagram generally illustrating a front face of an item utilizing the conventional barcode technology;

[009] Fig. 4 is a block diagram illustrating a customer submitting an item in a shipping and tracking system;

[010] Fig. 5 is a diagram illustrating a system allowing a customer to electronically access item processing information;

[011] Fig. 6 is a diagram comparing two types of bar codes;

[012] Fig. 7A is a diagram generally illustrating a second barcode for an origin confirmation service;

[013] Fig. 7B is a diagram illustrating an exemplary embodiment of the origin confirmation system;

[014] Fig. 8A is a diagram generally illustrating a second barcode for a destination confirmation service;

[015] Fig. 8B is a diagram illustrating an exemplary embodiment of the destination confirmation service;

[016] Fig. 9 is a block diagram illustrating an exemplary output provided to subscribers to an origin or destination confirmation service;

[017] Figs. 10A and 10B are diagrams illustrating various embodiments of a front face of an item;

[018] Figs. 11a, 11b, 11c, and 11d are diagrams illustrating various embodiments of advance shipping notice (ASN) data that may be provided in an ASN data file by a subscriber for verified items according to the present invention; and

[019] Fig. 12 is a diagram illustrating an exemplary shipment identification.

DESCRIPTION OF THE EMBODIMENTS

[020] Reference will now be made in detail to the present preferred embodiments of the invention illustrated in the accompanying drawings. Wherever possible, the same reference numbers are used throughout the drawings to refer to the same or like parts.

[021] Fig. 1 is a block diagram illustrating a customer submitting an item in a conventional shipping system. The system may include a sender 10, an item processing center 20 comprising processing stations A-C 22A, 22B, and 22C, and a recipient 30. The item may be a mail piece having any dimension, configuration, types of article, or form of container. For example, the mail piece may include a box, parcel, bundle, packet, envelope, etc. The mail piece may be a single piece from a larger mailing from sender 10. A carrier, such as a delivery truck, may transport the deposited item from sender 10 to item processing center 20.

[022] At item processing center 20, processing stations A-C 22A, 22B, and 22C may process each item. For example, at processing station A 22A, workers may sort the items to identify and separate return items from non-return or regular items. Return items may include a mail piece, such as a post card, form, or package, returned by a recipient to a customer or vendor, typically without prepayment of a shipping fee or postage by the sender. Postage and fees may be collected when the item is delivered to the addressee who originally distributed the return item. At processing station B 22B, workers may further sort return items based on a customer or vendor to whom the item is being returned. At processing station C 22C, workers may further process regular items for delivery to a recipient.

[023] Alternatively, items may be received from sender 10 at various presorting levels corresponding to reduced shipping rates. For example, in one embodiment a sender may sort the items to a fine level, e.g., by delivery carrier route, so that item processing center 20 may deliver the items immediately. In another embodiment, a sender may perform a primary sortation of the items that require further sorting by item processing center 20. In still another embodiment, described above, sender 10 may perform no item sorting. Regardless of the presorting level, at each processing station 22A-C, workers for item processing center 20 may perform a number of item processing tasks, such as identifying a type of service requested for each item and determining whether a shipping fee or postage for the type of service requested is sufficient.

[024] As shown in Fig. 1, however, processing stations A-C do not have a central connection. Thus, workers for item processing center 20 do not have any information regarding an item beyond the information printed on the item. For example, a worker at processing station B does not know the location, date, or time that an item was last processed. Similarly, a customer only knows upon receipt or confirmation of receipt by recipient 30, for example, whether item processing center 20 received an item and/or began processing.

[025] To aid item processing center 20 in delivering an item, a barcode identifying the delivery address of an item, such as a first barcode, may be applied to the item. Computer-controlled, high-speed machines may sort items using a barcode reader to interpret the first barcode. The barcode sorter may include an item feed, transport unit, and stackers, for example. Further, item processing center 20 may create the first barcode or a customer may create the first barcode in exchange for reduced shipping rates.

[026] Fig. 2 is a block diagram illustrating a first bar code. First barcode 250 may include one boundary bar or side bar 200 at each end of the code and twelve digits, consisting of eleven numerical digits 220 and one checksum digit 240, between the two side bars 200. Each digit 220 and 240

may have a combination of two tall and three short bars that form a pattern representing a number between zero and nine. Fig. 6, described in greater detail later, shows an exemplary conversion between the pattern for a digit and the number.

[027] Item processing center 20 may designate the last digit of the barcode as checksum digit 240 to detect errors while processing the barcode. Specifically, checksum digit 240 may be set as the number that causes a sum of the twelve digits in the barcode to be a multiple of 10. Thus, during processing, item processing center 20 may detect an error when a sum of the digits does not result in a multiple of ten.

[028] When taken in sequence, the twelve numbers derived from the twelve digits of the first barcode 250 comprise a digital delivery address, such as a zone improvement plan (ZIP) code, that aids item processing center 20 in delivering an item to its delivery address.

[029] Fig. 3 is a diagram generally illustrating a front face of an item utilizing the conventional barcode technology. The front face of the item may include a sender address 300, a delivery address 320, an appropriate shipping fee or postage 340, and a first barcode 250. First barcode 250 may be used by item processing center 20 as a digital delivery address for aiding the sortation and delivery of the item from sender address 300 to delivery address 320. First barcode 250 may be printed on the front face of the item, or it may be attached thereto using a label. Typically, first barcode 250 is located at the lower right corner on the front face of the article, as shown in Fig. 1.

[030] One improvement on the conventional first barcode technology may be achieved by electronically providing a second barcode to an item to uniquely relate an item to a customer and provide tracking information regarding the item to the customer. In this manner, the customer may track incoming or outgoing items or a combination thereof. Particularly, the customer may affix or print a first barcode and a second barcode to an item. An item processing center may process the codes in combination to record

information regarding the processing of an item associated with a particular customer and provide the customer with the recorded information. Customers may access the information over a network connection to a web site or by downloading the files using file transfer protocol (FTP).

[031] Fig. 4 is a block diagram illustrating a customer submitting an item in a shipping and tracking system. The system may include a sender 400, an item processing service 410 comprising processing stations A-C 412A, 412B, and 412C, an integrated data system (IDS) 430, an electronic shipping office (ESO) 440, and a recipient 420. IDS 430 may connect processing stations A-C 412A, 412B, and 412C at a centralized location, allowing information regarding an item to be stored.

[032] After an item is received from sender 400 at item processing service 410, processing station A 412A, for example, may scan a first barcode and a second barcode on an item to uniquely identify the item in IDS 430 and upload information into IDS 430 regarding the item. For example, processing station A may upload information regarding its location, such as its facility identification or zip code, along with a date and time for processing the item.

[033] Similarly, processing stations B and C each may scan the first barcode and the second barcode on the item to identify the item in IDS 430 and upload updated information, regarding the location or identity of the processing station, and a date and time for processing the item. In this manner, an item may be tracked throughout the delivery process. IDS 430 may forward the tracking information to ESO 440, where it may be accessed by a customer associated with the item.

[034] Fig. 5 is a diagram illustrating a system allowing a customer to electronically access item processing information. The system may include a subscriber 501, a network 502, an electronic shipping office (ESO) 440 comprising a user interface or website 505 and a FTP 504, and IDS 430. Subscriber 501 may include a customer who wishes to receive tracking information regarding outgoing items or incoming items. Fig. 5 depicts that the customer may connect to ESO 440 via network 502. ESO 440 may

include data received from IDS 430. The data may be received at ESO 440 continuously or periodically throughout the day. Subscriber 501 may obtain tracking information by accessing website 505 at ESO 440 and downloading the information or, for larger files, receiving the tracking information by FTP 504. If subscriber chooses to receive direct FTP access for data, the client may provide the Internet Protocol (IP) address and name of his FTP server, as well as a customer system username and password, a desired schedule for receiving the data, and a directory name for storing the data.

[035] Fig. 6 is a diagram comparing two types of bar codes. Fig. 6 shows that a digit in the first barcode may be inversely related to a digit representing the same number in the second barcode by switching tall bars for short bars and short bars for tall. For example, a sequence comprising tall, tall, short, short, and short represents the number zero in the first barcode, whereas a sequence comprising short, short, tall, tall, and tall represents the number zero in the second barcode. Likewise, a sequence comprising short, tall, short, tall, and short represents the number five in the first barcode, whereas a sequence comprising tall, short, tall, short, and tall represents the number five in the second barcode. By using current barcoding methods for the first barcode, the second barcode is easy and inexpensive to apply.

[036] Although not shown, the first barcode and the second barcode may be configured further to represent alphabetical characters. For example, using the code provided in Fig. 6, the letter "A" may be represented by a two digit numeric combination, such as 11. Similarly, the letter "B" may be represented by the two digit combination "22," and so on. One skilled in the art can readily recognize that other alpha numeric schemes are possible.

[037] As described above, subscriber 501 may enroll in a service for receiving information regarding incoming items, which may be called an origin confirmation service, or a service for receiving information regarding outgoing items, which may be called destination confirmation service. Each of the services may provide the subscriber with a date and time that an item was last processed, a processing station 412A-412C where the item was last

processed, and first barcode 250 and second barcode 700 information. The origin confirmation service and destination confirmation service are discussed in greater detail below with reference to Figs. 7A, 7B, 8A, and 8B, respectively.

[038] Fig. 7A is a diagram generally illustrating a second barcode for an origin confirmation service. Fig. 7A depicts second barcode 700 may include a side bar 710 at each end of the code and twelve digits, consisting of a two digit service plan 720, a nine digit identification 740, and a check digit 760. Further second barcode 700 may have a combination of three tall and two short bars that form a pattern representing a number between zero and nine, as shown in Fig. 6.

[039] Referring back to Fig. 7, service plan 720 may identify the type of service plan subscriber 501 receives. To identify origin confirmation service, the two digit service plan 720 may represent the number "21." Like the first barcode, the last digit of the second barcode may be designated as checksum 760 to detect errors while processing the barcode. Specifically, checksum 760 may be set as the number that causes a sum of the twelve digits in the barcode to be a multiple of 10. Thus, during processing, the shipping company or, more particularly, item processing center 410 may detect an error when a sum of the digits does not result in a multiple of ten.

[040] By using a first barcode, such as a POSTnet™ code, which includes a digital version of the delivery address, a shipping company, more particularly, IDS 430, may identify a subscriber of the origin confirmation service, which provides information regarding an incoming item, by the first barcode on the item. Thus, IDS 430 does not need any digits in the second barcode to identify the subscriber for providing item processing information, and nine digit identification 740 may remain available to the subscriber for his own use in identifying the item. For example, the subscriber may identify a recipient, particular shipment, or other information for linking the item to an established information database (not shown).

[041] As described with reference with Fig. 4, IDS 430 may collect and report data to subscriber 501 via ESO 440. The data may include all processing information related to the processing of the item beginning at processing station A, the station that first processes an individual item. Thus, using the origin confirmation service, a subscriber may know when payments, orders, and responses are on their way and who sent them. By knowing this processing information, subscribers may optimize resources in advance of actual receipt of the items.

[042] For instance, a mail order company origin confirmation service subscriber may optimize staffing and inventory levels when an order is on the way, thereby saving money and improving the quality of service for the customer. Additionally, a financial business or other company that processes payments, may better manage cash flow and staff processing centers based on information regarding estimated arrival dates of incoming bill payments. For example, a utility company, having knowledge that a late payment is arriving, may avoid dispatching personnel to physically shut off service, thereby avoiding unnecessary fees.

[043] The origin confirmation service may also allow mail marketers to evaluate the success of ad campaigns by monitoring the frequency and/or speed with which a customer or zip code area responds to a solicitation. The evaluated information may be used to improve the targeting of the mail campaign, for example.

[044] Fig. 7B is a diagram illustrating an exemplary embodiment of the origin confirmation system. Using Fig. 6 to translate the second barcode 700, Fig. 7B shows the two digit service plan 720 represents the number "21" designating origin confirmation service, nine digit identification 740 represents the number "201-402-356," and one digit checksum 560 represents the number "4." Adding each of the twelve digits yields 30, a multiple of 10. Thus, the exemplary second barcode 700 appears free of single-bit errors.

[045] Fig. 8A is a diagram generally illustrating a second barcode for a destination confirmation service. Fig. 8A depicts second barcode 700 may

include a side bar 800 at each end of the code and twelve digits, consisting of a two digit service plan 820, a five digit subscriber 840, a four digit tracking 860, and an one digit checksum 880, between the two side bars 800. Five-digit subscriber 840 may include a five-digit subscriber identification assigned by the USPS to identify destination confirmation service subscribers. Four-digit tracking 860 may include a four-digit field defined by the sender to help identify the item. Service plan 820 may represent the number "22" to designate the service as destination confirmation service.

[046] As described with reference with Fig. 4, a shipping company, more particularly IDS 430, may collect and report data to subscriber 501 via ESO 440. The data may include all processing information related to the processing of the item. Thus, destination confirmation service may store information regarding the last machine handling the item before delivery, for example. Destination confirmation service may provide added assurance to a subscriber that a recipient will receive an outgoing item. For example, a credit card company or sender of other "high value" items, such as mail pieces, may ensure its items are sorted at the proper destination facility and properly delivered to reduce credit card fraud or other mail fraud.

[047] In addition, a marketer may use the destination confirmation service to better synchronize a follow-up phone call or e-mail after delivery of a particular solicitation, thereby enhancing sales. Marketers may further evaluate the delivery information to identify delivery days of the week that are best for generating a positive response from potential customers, for example. Further, a company may use the information to optimize staffing after delivering invoices to handle billing inquiries. Alternatively, the subscriber may evaluate the processed item delivery options to identify delivery trends by zip code or a geographical market segment.

[048] Fig. 8B is a diagram illustrating an exemplary embodiment of the destination confirmation service. Using Fig. 6 to translate the second barcode 700, Fig. 8B shows the two digit service plan 820 represents the number "22" designating destination confirmation service, five digit subscriber 840

represents the number "20-140," four digit tracking 860 represents the number "2-356," and one digit checksum 560 represents the number "3." Adding each of the twelve digits yields 30, a multiple of 10. Thus, the exemplary second barcode 700 appears free of single-bit errors.

[049] Fig. 9 is a block diagram illustrating an exemplary output provided to subscribers to an origin or destination confirmation service. The output may include an item processing plant 900, such as a sectional center facility (SCF) that serves the delivery address on the item, an operation number 910, a date the item was processed 920, a time the item was processed 930, first barcode 250, and second barcode 700. For example, item processing plant 900 may indicate a zip code of the item processing plant in which the item was processed. Operation number 910 may indicate the type of operation or level of sortation, such as a primary sortation for incoming items, performed on the item. A list of various operation numbers may be obtained from the shipping company. The time that the item was processed 930 is indicated in an hour to minute format (HH:MM). However, in an alternative embodiment, the time 930 may be configured to show hours, minutes, and seconds. The first barcode 250 and a second barcode 700 may be used by the subscriber to identify a particular item. In another embodiment, a subscriber may be able to get the data scrubbed before delivery. For example, scrubbing the data may help reduce the amount of data provided to the subscriber or may summarize some of the data provided.

[050] Figs. 10A and 10B are diagrams illustrating various embodiments of a front face of an item. Figs. 10A and 10B show the front face of the item may include a sender or return address 300, a delivery address 320, an appropriate shipping fee or postage 340, a first barcode 250, and a second barcode 700. First barcode 250 and second barcode 700 may be printed on or attached to the front face of the item by the customer. First barcode 250 and second barcode 700 may be used in combination to identify an item, record information associated with the item, and provide electronic access to a customer associated with the item.

[051] In one embodiment, Fig. 10A shows second barcode 700 located above delivery address 320 and first barcode 250 located at the lower right corner on the front face of the item. In another embodiment, Fig. 4B shows second barcode 700 located above delivery address 320, and first barcode 250 located below delivery address 320. In yet another embodiment, not shown, second barcode 700 may be located below delivery address 320, and first barcode 250 and second barcode 700 are not restricted to the embodiments described above. In general, the codes 250 and 700 may be placed at any designated location of the item. For example, in another embodiment, second barcode 700 may be located anywhere except the lower right corner on the front face of the item, which is designated for first barcode 250. In still another embodiment, first barcode 700 may be placed above or below a keyline. A keyline may contain specific information about the item and may be printed two or more lines above delivery address 320, for example. In still another embodiment, the first and second barcodes may be located within the address block of the item as designated by the shipping company's specifications.

[052] Although the above system has been described with reference to service plans 720 corresponding to origin confirmation service or destination confirmation service, one skilled in the art will readily recognize that numerous the service plans may be expanded to aide the identification process. For example, in another embodiment, the two digit service plan may be expanded to include additional numerals, representing a first class letter for origin confirmation service, a first class flat for origin confirmation service, a standard mail letter for origin confirmation service, a standard flat for origin confirmation service, a first class letter for destination confirmation service, a first class flat for destination confirmation service, a standard mail letter for destination confirmation service, a standard flat for destination confirmation service, etc. Similarly, in yet another embodiment, the two digit service plan may include a numeral representing a subscriber who receives confirmation

service for incoming and outgoing items. Accordingly, the present invention is not limited to the particular service plans provided herein.

[053] Although items may usually be processed by processing station A on the same day of arrival, it is possible for there to be a delay between an arrival of an item and processing of the item at the processing station A. Thus, it is desirable to provide an arrival date for destination confirmation service, indicating an arrival date for an entire shipment that includes the item being tracked. With this information, the shipping company may provide further features to the subscriber, such as a confirmation that the shipping company has taken possession of a shipment. Further, the shipping company may evaluate this information to build trend and statistical information about the performance of the confirmation service and overall item processing. For example, the shipping company may compare the number of items deposited for processing to the number of items scanned by the confirmation service to determine how many pieces are not properly tracked by the confirmation service. Further, the shipping company may determine the length of time items, in general, take for processing after arrival at the shipping company.

[054] To determine an arrival of an item before physically processing the individual item, the shipping company may receive a file, such as an advance shipping notice (ASN) data file, providing information regarding an anticipated drop date for a shipment including the item. The ASN file may indicate a shipment identification identifying the shipment and a customer identification identifying the customer associated with the shipment, along with other information, such as, for example, an estimated drop date. Thus, when the shipment arrives at a shipping company's facility with a shipment identification barcode on a form accompany the shipment, for example, the shipping company may scan the shipment identification barcode and use the information in the ASN file to link the shipment with a customer before processing an individual item in the shipment. The shipping company may notify the customer when the shipment arrives before processing the item.

[055] In an embodiment of the present invention, the ASN file may be prepared by a sender or by a company on behalf of the sender (i.e., a consolidator). In an embodiment of the present invention, the file may be provided to the shipping company electronically.

[056] In an embodiment of the present invention, the item may be verified at the sender's premises before the shipping company takes possession. During verification, a shipment of items may be weighed to determine the total weight of the items and the required shipping fee or postage, for example. In another embodiment of the present invention, the items may be verified at a facility of the shipping company.

[057] Figs. 11a, 11b, 11c, and 11d are diagrams illustrating various embodiments of advance shipping notice (ASN) data that may be provided in a ASN data file by a subscriber for verified items according to the present invention. The ASN data may include shipment identification 1102, facility code 1104, estimated drop date 1106, estimated drop time 1108, appointment number 1110, subscriber identification 1112, items identification 1114, items name 1116, service code 1118, number second barcodes 1120, total number of items dropped 1122, delivery window start date 1124, delivery window end date 1126, presort level 1128, second barcode 1130, and a number items second barcode coded 1132. The ASN data may be stored in an ASN data file provided electronically by a subscriber to the shipping company.

Alternatively, a hard copy of the file may be provided to the shipping company. In an embodiment of the invention, ASN data file may include a single data file in comma delimited format, each record consisting of the 16 data elements or fields listed above. One skilled in the art, however, recognizes that the present invention is not limited to this data file format. The file may be delimited by tabs or spaces, or the file may include multiple files, for example. Each ASN data film may have one or more shipments, and each shipment may have at least one second barcode.

[058] Shipment identification 1102, facility code 1104, estimated drop date 1106, estimated drop time 1108, and appointment number 1110 are

shipping elements regarding the shipment. Shipment Identification 1102 may be a twenty digit alphanumeric code that uniquely identifies a single shipment or drop. This number is discussed in greater detail below with reference to Fig. 12. Facility code 1104 may be a five digit numeric code that represents a shipping company facility where the shipment is dropped. For example, a zip code of the facility may represent a facility (e.g., Northern Virginia processing and distribution center (P&DC) = 22081). If the shipment is dropped at another facility, the second drop represents a separate shipment that requires another ASN form. Estimated drop date 1106 may include an eight digit numeric code in a format MMDDYYYY that represents a date the item is dropped at the shipping company facility. Estimated drop time 1108 may include a four digit numeric code in a format HHMM that represents a time the shipment is dropped at the shipping company facility. Estimated drop time 1108 may be an optional feature. Appointment number 1110 may include a twelve digit appointment number assigned by a drop ship appointment system (DSAS) that corresponds to the shipment. The appointment number may not be required for all shipments.

[059] Elements related to the item may include subscriber identification 1112, items identification 1114, items name 1116, service code 1118, number second barcodes 1120, total number of items dropped 1122, delivery window start date 1124, delivery window end date 1126, presort level 1128, second barcode 1130, and number of items second barcode coded 1132. Subscriber identification 1112 may include a nine digit numeric subscriber identification assigned by the shipping company. The value assigned by the shipping company may be padded with leading zeros to nine digits. For example, an assigned value "12-345" should be zero padded as "000-012-345."

[060] Items identification 1114 may include an eight digit numeric unique identifier assigned by the customer for the items shipped. The value may be padded with leading zeros to eight digits. Items name 1116 may include a 50 digit alphanumeric items name describing the items shipped.

(12) INTERNATIONAL APPLICATION PUBLISHED UNDER THE PATENT COOPERATION TREATY (PCT)

(19) World Intellectual Property Organization
International Bureau



(43) International Publication Date
20 March 2003 (20.03.2003)

PCT

(10) International Publication Number
WO 03/023677 A1

(51) International Patent Classification⁷: **G06F 17/60**

(21) International Application Number: **PCT/US01/28001**

(22) International Filing Date:
7 September 2001 (07.09.2001)

(25) Filing Language: English

(26) Publication Language: English

(71) Applicant (for all designated States except US): **UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE [US/US]; 475 L'Enfant Plaza, S.W., Room 6344, Washington, DC 20260-1135 (US).**

(72) Inventor; and

(75) Inventor/Applicant (for US only): **ALDSTADT, Harry [US/US]; 13201 Windy Leaf Court, Woodbridge, VA 22192 (US).**

(74) Agents: **GARRETT, Arthur, S. et al.; Finnegan, Henderson, Farabow Garrett & Dunner, L.L.P., 1300 I Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20005-3315 (US).**

(81) Designated States (national): AE, AG, AL, AM, AT, AU, AZ, BA, BB, BG, BR, BY, BZ, CA, CH, CN, CO, CR, CU, CZ, DE, DK, DM, DZ, EC, EE, ES, FI, GB, GD, GE, GH, GM, HR, HU, ID, IL, IN, IS, JP, KE, KG, KP, KR, KZ, LC, LK, LR, LS, LT, LU, LV, MA, MD, MG, MK, MN, MW, MX, MZ, NO, NZ, PH, PL, PT, RO, RU, SD, SE, SG, SI, SK, SL, TJ, TM, TR, TT, TZ, UA, UG, US, UZ, VN, YU, ZA, ZW.

(84) Designated States (regional): ARIPO patent (GH, GM, KE, LS, MW, MZ, SD, SL, SZ, TZ, UG, ZW), Eurasian patent (AM, AZ, BY, KG, KZ, MD, RU, TJ, TM), European patent (AT, BE, CH, CY, DE, DK, ES, FI, FR, GB, GR, IE, IT, LU, MC, NL, PT, SE, TR), OAPI patent (BF, BJ, CF, CG, CI, CM, GA, GN, GQ, GW, ML, MR, NE, SN, TD, TG).

Published:

— with international search report

For two-letter codes and other abbreviations, refer to the "Guidance Notes on Codes and Abbreviations" appearing at the beginning of each regular issue of the PCT Gazette.

WO 03/023677 A1

(54) Title: ITEM TRACKING AND ANTICIPATED DELIVERY CONFIRMATION SYSTEM METHOD

(57) Abstract: This disclosure describes systems and methods for electronically tracking information. The tracking information may include arrival information regarding an arrival of the item and processing information regarding processing of the item.

THIS PAGE BLANK (USPTO)

THIS PAGE BLANK (USPTO)

ITEM TRACKING AND ANTICIPATED DELIVERY
CONFIRMATION SYSTEM AND METHOD
DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

Field of the Invention

[001] The present invention relates to a method and system for tracking and delivering items being shipped. More particularly, the invention relates to a method and system for electronically tracking items in a processing and delivery system and providing a customer access to item tracking information.

Background of the Invention

[002] An ongoing goal of shipping companies that ship items from a sender to a recipient is to provide customers with valuable information regarding the items being shipped. It is therefore desirable to enable customers to access processing information regarding incoming and outgoing items. Particularly, it is desirable to inform customers when a shipping company takes possession of an item and to provide customers with a unique identification for monitoring the item.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[003] In accordance with the invention, a method for providing tracking information for an item being shipped, associated with a shipping customer may include receiving anticipated arrival information from the customer regarding an anticipated arrival of the item. The anticipated arrival information may include a predetermined shipment identification identifying an anticipated shipment associated with the item, and a predetermined customer identification identifying the customer. The method may further include receiving a first shipment with a first shipment identification, comparing the first shipment identification to the predetermined shipment identification, and notifying the customer with confirmed arrival information when the first shipment identification matches the predetermined shipment identification.

[004] It is to be understood that both the foregoing general description and the following detailed description are exemplary and explanatory only and are not restrictive of the invention, as claimed.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[005] The accompanying drawings, which are incorporated in and constitute a part of this specification, illustrate embodiments of the invention and together with the description, serve to explain the principles of the invention. In the drawings:

[006] Fig. 1 is a block diagram illustrating a customer submitting an item in a conventional shipping system;

[007] Fig. 2 is a block diagram illustrating a first bar code;

[008] Fig. 3 is a diagram generally illustrating a front face of an item utilizing the conventional barcode technology;

[009] Fig. 4 is a block diagram illustrating a customer submitting an item in a shipping and tracking system;

[010] Fig. 5 is a diagram illustrating a system allowing a customer to electronically access item processing information;

[011] Fig. 6 is a diagram comparing two types of bar codes;

[012] Fig. 7A is a diagram generally illustrating a second barcode for an origin confirmation service;

[013] Fig. 7B is a diagram illustrating an exemplary embodiment of the origin confirmation system;

[014] Fig. 8A is a diagram generally illustrating a second barcode for a destination confirmation service;

[015] Fig. 8B is a diagram illustrating an exemplary embodiment of the destination confirmation service;

[016] Fig. 9 is a block diagram illustrating an exemplary output provided to subscribers to an origin or destination confirmation service;

[017] Figs. 10A and 10B are diagrams illustrating various embodiments of a front face of an item;

[018] Figs. 11a, 11b, 11c, and 11d are diagrams illustrating various embodiments of advance shipping notice (ASN) data that may be provided in an ASN data file by a subscriber for verified items according to the present invention; and

[019] Fig. 12 is a diagram illustrating an exemplary shipment identification.

DESCRIPTION OF THE EMBODIMENTS

[020] Reference will now be made in detail to the present preferred embodiments of the invention illustrated in the accompanying drawings. Wherever possible, the same reference numbers are used throughout the drawings to refer to the same or like parts.

[021] Fig. 1 is a block diagram illustrating a customer submitting an item in a conventional shipping system. The system may include a sender 10, an item processing center 20 comprising processing stations A-C 22A, 22B, and 22C, and a recipient 30. The item may be a mail piece having any dimension, configuration, types of article, or form of container. For example, the mail piece may include a box, parcel, bundle, packet, envelope, etc. The mail piece may be a single piece from a larger mailing from sender 10. A carrier, such as a delivery truck, may transport the deposited item from sender 10 to item processing center 20.

[022] At item processing center 20, processing stations A-C 22A, 22B, and 22C may process each item. For example, at processing station A 22A, workers may sort the items to identify and separate return items from non-return or regular items. Return items may include a mail piece, such as a post card, form, or package, returned by a recipient to a customer or vendor, typically without prepayment of a shipping fee or postage by the sender. Postage and fees may be collected when the item is delivered to the addressee who originally distributed the return item. At processing station B 22B, workers may further sort return items based on a customer or vendor to whom the item is being returned. At processing station C 22C, workers may further process regular items for delivery to a recipient.

[023] Alternatively, items may be received from sender 10 at various presorting levels corresponding to reduced shipping rates. For example, in one embodiment a sender may sort the items to a fine level, e.g., by delivery carrier route, so that item processing center 20 may deliver the items immediately. In another embodiment, a sender may perform a primary sortation of the items that require further sorting by item processing center 20. In still another embodiment, described above, sender 10 may perform no item sorting. Regardless of the presorting level, at each processing station 22A-C, workers for item processing center 20 may perform a number of item processing tasks, such as identifying a type of service requested for each item and determining whether a shipping fee or postage for the type of service requested is sufficient.

[024] As shown in Fig. 1, however, processing stations A-C do not have a central connection. Thus, workers for item processing center 20 do not have any information regarding an item beyond the information printed on the item. For example, a worker at processing station B does not know the location, date, or time that an item was last processed. Similarly, a customer only knows upon receipt or confirmation of receipt by recipient 30, for example, whether item processing center 20 received an item and/or began processing.

[025] To aid item processing center 20 in delivering an item, a barcode identifying the delivery address of an item, such as a first barcode, may be applied to the item. Computer-controlled, high-speed machines may sort items using a barcode reader to interpret the first barcode. The barcode sorter may include an item feed, transport unit, and stackers, for example. Further, item processing center 20 may create the first barcode or a customer may create the first barcode in exchange for reduced shipping rates.

[026] Fig. 2 is a block diagram illustrating a first bar code. First barcode 250 may include one boundary bar or side bar 200 at each end of the code and twelve digits, consisting of eleven numerical digits 220 and one checksum digit 240, between the two side bars 200. Each digit 220 and 240

may have a combination of two tall and three short bars that form a pattern representing a number between zero and nine. Fig. 6, described in greater detail later, shows an exemplary conversion between the pattern for a digit and the number.

[027] Item processing center 20 may designate the last digit of the barcode as checksum digit 240 to detect errors while processing the barcode. Specifically, checksum digit 240 may be set as the number that causes a sum of the twelve digits in the barcode to be a multiple of 10. Thus, during processing, item processing center 20 may detect an error when a sum of the digits does not result in a multiple of ten.

[028] When taken in sequence, the twelve numbers derived from the twelve digits of the first barcode 250 comprise a digital delivery address, such as a zone improvement plan (ZIP) code, that aids item processing center 20 in delivering an item to its delivery address.

[029] Fig. 3 is a diagram generally illustrating a front face of an item utilizing the conventional barcode technology. The front face of the item may include a sender address 300, a delivery address 320, an appropriate shipping fee or postage 340, and a first barcode 250. First barcode 250 may be used by item processing center 20 as a digital delivery address for aiding the sortation and delivery of the item from sender address 300 to delivery address 320. First barcode 250 may be printed on the front face of the item, or it may be attached thereto using a label. Typically, first barcode 250 is located at the lower right corner on the front face of the article, as shown in Fig. 1.

[030] One improvement on the conventional first barcode technology may be achieved by electronically providing a second barcode to an item to uniquely relate an item to a customer and provide tracking information regarding the item to the customer. In this manner, the customer may track incoming or outgoing items or a combination thereof. Particularly, the customer may affix or print a first barcode and a second barcode to an item. An item processing center may process the codes in combination to record

information regarding the processing of an item associated with a particular customer and provide the customer with the recorded information. Customers may access the information over a network connection to a web site or by downloading the files using file transfer protocol (FTP).

[031] Fig. 4 is a block diagram illustrating a customer submitting an item in a shipping and tracking system. The system may include a sender 400, an item processing service 410 comprising processing stations A-C 412A, 412B, and 412C, an integrated data system (IDS) 430, an electronic shipping office (ESO) 440, and a recipient 420. IDS 430 may connect processing stations A-C 412A, 412B, and 412C at a centralized location, allowing information regarding an item to be stored.

[032] After an item is received from sender 400 at item processing service 410, processing station A 412A, for example, may scan a first barcode and a second barcode on an item to uniquely identify the item in IDS 430 and upload information into IDS 430 regarding the item. For example, processing station A may upload information regarding its location, such as its facility identification or zip code, along with a date and time for processing the item.

[033] Similarly, processing stations B and C each may scan the first barcode and the second barcode on the item to identify the item in IDS 430 and upload updated information, regarding the location or identity of the processing station, and a date and time for processing the item. In this manner, an item may be tracked throughout the delivery process. IDS 430 may forward the tracking information to ESO 440, where it may be accessed by a customer associated with the item.

[034] Fig. 5 is a diagram illustrating a system allowing a customer to electronically access item processing information. The system may include a subscriber 501, a network 502, an electronic shipping office (ESO) 440 comprising a user interface or website 505 and a FTP 504, and IDS 430. Subscriber 501 may include a customer who wishes to receive tracking information regarding outgoing items or incoming items. Fig. 5 depicts that the customer may connect to ESO 440 via network 502. ESO 440 may

include data received from IDS 430. The data may be received at ESO 440 continuously or periodically throughout the day. Subscriber 501 may obtain tracking information by accessing website 505 at ESO 440 and downloading the information or, for larger files, receiving the tracking information by FTP 504. If subscriber chooses to receive direct FTP access for data, the client may provide the Internet Protocol (IP) address and name of his FTP server, as well as a customer system username and password, a desired schedule for receiving the data, and a directory name for storing the data.

[035] Fig. 6 is a diagram comparing two types of bar codes. Fig. 6 shows that a digit in the first barcode may be inversely related to a digit representing the same number in the second barcode by switching tall bars for short bars and short bars for tall. For example, a sequence comprising tall, tall, short, short, and short represents the number zero in the first barcode, whereas a sequence comprising short, short, tall, tall, and tall represents the number zero in the second barcode. Likewise, a sequence comprising short, tall, short, tall, and short represents the number five in the first barcode, whereas a sequence comprising tall, short, tall, short, and tall represents the number five in the second barcode. By using current barcoding methods for the first barcode, the second barcode is easy and inexpensive to apply.

[036] Although not shown, the first barcode and the second barcode may be configured further to represent alphabetical characters. For example, using the code provided in Fig. 6, the letter "A" may be represented by a two digit numeric combination, such as 11. Similarly, the letter "B" may be represented by the two digit combination "22," and so on. One skilled in the art can readily recognize that other alpha numeric schemes are possible.

[037] As described above, subscriber 501 may enroll in a service for receiving information regarding incoming items, which may be called an origin confirmation service, or a service for receiving information regarding outgoing items, which may be called destination confirmation service. Each of the services may provide the subscriber with a date and time that an item was last processed, a processing station 412A-412C where the item was last

processed, and first barcode 250 and second barcode 700 information. The origin confirmation service and destination confirmation service are discussed in greater detail below with reference to Figs. 7A, 7B, 8A, and 8B, respectively.

[038] Fig. 7A is a diagram generally illustrating a second barcode for an origin confirmation service. Fig. 7A depicts second barcode 700 may include a side bar 710 at each end of the code and twelve digits, consisting of a two digit service plan 720, a nine digit identification 740, and a check digit 760. Further second barcode 700 may have a combination of three tall and two short bars that form a pattern representing a number between zero and nine, as shown in Fig. 6.

[039] Referring back to Fig. 7, service plan 720 may identify the type of service plan subscriber 501 receives. To identify origin confirmation service, the two digit service plan 720 may represent the number "21." Like the first barcode, the last digit of the second barcode may be designated as checksum 760 to detect errors while processing the barcode. Specifically, checksum 760 may be set as the number that causes a sum of the twelve digits in the barcode to be a multiple of 10. Thus, during processing, the shipping company or, more particularly, item processing center 410 may detect an error when a sum of the digits does not result in a multiple of ten.

[040] By using a first barcode, such as a POSTnet™ code, which includes a digital version of the delivery address, a shipping company, more particularly, IDS 430, may identify a subscriber of the origin confirmation service, which provides information regarding an incoming item, by the first barcode on the item. Thus, IDS 430 does not need any digits in the second barcode to identify the subscriber for providing item processing information, and nine digit identification 740 may remain available to the subscriber for his own use in identifying the item. For example, the subscriber may identify a recipient, particular shipment, or other information for linking the item to an established information database (not shown).

[041] As described with reference with Fig. 4, IDS 430 may collect and report data to subscriber 501 via ESO 440. The data may include all processing information related to the processing of the item beginning at processing station A, the station that first processes an individual item. Thus, using the origin confirmation service, a subscriber may know when payments, orders, and responses are on their way and who sent them. By knowing this processing information, subscribers may optimize resources in advance of actual receipt of the items.

[042] For instance, a mail order company origin confirmation service subscriber may optimize staffing and inventory levels when an order is on the way, thereby saving money and improving the quality of service for the customer. Additionally, a financial business or other company that processes payments, may better manage cash flow and staff processing centers based on information regarding estimated arrival dates of incoming bill payments. For example, a utility company, having knowledge that a late payment is arriving, may avoid dispatching personnel to physically shut off service, thereby avoiding unnecessary fees.

[043] The origin confirmation service may also allow mail marketers to evaluate the success of ad campaigns by monitoring the frequency and/or speed with which a customer or zip code area responds to a solicitation. The evaluated information may be used to improve the targeting of the mail campaign, for example.

[044] Fig. 7B is a diagram illustrating an exemplary embodiment of the origin confirmation system. Using Fig. 6 to translate the second barcode 700, Fig. 7B shows the two digit service plan 720 represents the number "21" designating origin confirmation service, nine digit identification 740 represents the number "201-402-356," and one digit checksum 560 represents the number "4." Adding each of the twelve digits yields 30, a multiple of 10. Thus, the exemplary second barcode 700 appears free of single-bit errors.

[045] Fig. 8A is a diagram generally illustrating a second barcode for a destination confirmation service. Fig. 8A depicts second barcode 700 may

include a side bar 800 at each end of the code and twelve digits, consisting of a two digit service plan 820, a five digit subscriber 840, a four digit tracking 860, and an one digit checksum 880, between the two side bars 800. Five-digit subscriber 840 may include a five-digit subscriber identification assigned by the USPS to identify destination confirmation service subscribers. Four-digit tracking 860 may include a four-digit field defined by the sender to help identify the item. Service plan 820 may represent the number "22" to designate the service as destination confirmation service.

[046] As described with reference with Fig. 4, a shipping company, more particularly IDS 430, may collect and report data to subscriber 501 via ESO 440. The data may include all processing information related to the processing of the item. Thus, destination confirmation service may store information regarding the last machine handling the item before delivery, for example. Destination confirmation service may provide added assurance to a subscriber that a recipient will receive an outgoing item. For example, a credit card company or sender of other "high value" items, such as mail pieces, may ensure its items are sorted at the proper destination facility and properly delivered to reduce credit card fraud or other mail fraud.

[047] In addition, a marketer may use the destination confirmation service to better synchronize a follow-up phone call or e-mail after delivery of a particular solicitation, thereby enhancing sales. Marketers may further evaluate the delivery information to identify delivery days of the week that are best for generating a positive response from potential customers, for example. Further, a company may use the information to optimize staffing after delivering invoices to handle billing inquiries. Alternatively, the subscriber may evaluate the processed item delivery options to identify delivery trends by zip code or a geographical market segment.

[048] Fig. 8B is a diagram illustrating an exemplary embodiment of the destination confirmation service. Using Fig. 6 to translate the second barcode 700, Fig. 8B shows the two digit service plan 820 represents the number "22" designating destination confirmation service, five digit subscriber 840

represents the number "20-140," four digit tracking 860 represents the number "2-356," and one digit checksum 560 represents the number "3." Adding each of the twelve digits yields 30, a multiple of 10. Thus, the exemplary second barcode 700 appears free of single-bit errors.

[049] Fig. 9 is a block diagram illustrating an exemplary output provided to subscribers to an origin or destination confirmation service. The output may include an item processing plant 900, such as a sectional center facility (SCF) that serves the delivery address on the item, an operation number 910, a date the item was processed 920, a time the item was processed 930, first barcode 250, and second barcode 700. For example, item processing plant 900 may indicate a zip code of the item processing plant in which the item was processed. Operation number 910 may indicate the type of operation or level of sortation, such as a primary sortation for incoming items, performed on the item. A list of various operation numbers may be obtained from the shipping company. The time that the item was processed 930 is indicated in an hour to minute format (HH:MM). However, in an alternative embodiment, the time 930 may be configured to show hours, minutes, and seconds. The first barcode 250 and a second barcode 700 may be used by the subscriber to identify a particular item. In another embodiment, a subscriber may be able to get the data scrubbed before delivery. For example, scrubbing the data may help reduce the amount of data provided to the subscriber or may summarize some of the data provided.

[050] Figs. 10A and 10B are diagrams illustrating various embodiments of a front face of an item. Figs. 10A and 10B show the front face of the item may include a sender or return address 300, a delivery address 320, an appropriate shipping fee or postage 340, a first barcode 250, and a second barcode 700. First barcode 250 and second barcode 700 may be printed on or attached to the front face of the item by the customer. First barcode 250 and second barcode 700 may be used in combination to identify an item, record information associated with the item, and provide electronic access to a customer associated with the item.

[051] In one embodiment, Fig. 10A shows second barcode 700 located above delivery address 320 and first barcode 250 located at the lower right corner on the front face of the item. In another embodiment, Fig. 4B shows second barcode 700 located above delivery address 320, and first barcode 250 located below delivery address 320. In yet another embodiment, not shown, second barcode 700 may be located below delivery address 320, and first barcode 250 and second barcode 700 are not restricted to the embodiments described above. In general, the codes 250 and 700 may be placed at any designated location of the item. For example, in another embodiment, second barcode 700 may be located anywhere except the lower right corner on the front face of the item, which is designated for first barcode 250. In still another embodiment, first barcode 700 may be placed above or below a keyline. A keyline may contain specific information about the item and may be printed two or more lines above delivery address 320, for example. In still another embodiment, the first and second barcodes may be located within the address block of the item as designated by the shipping company's specifications.

[052] Although the above system has been described with reference to service plans 720 corresponding to origin confirmation service or destination confirmation service, one skilled in the art will readily recognize that numerous the service plans may be expanded to aide the identification process. For example, in another embodiment, the two digit service plan may be expanded to include additional numerals, representing a first class letter for origin confirmation service, a first class flat for origin confirmation service, a standard mail letter for origin confirmation service, a standard flat for origin confirmation service, a first class letter for destination confirmation service, a first class flat for destination confirmation service, a standard mail letter for destination confirmation service, a standard flat for destination confirmation service, etc. Similarly, in yet another embodiment, the two digit service plan may include a numeral representing a subscriber who receives confirmation

service for incoming and outgoing items. Accordingly, the present invention is not limited to the particular service plans provided herein.

[053] Although items may usually be processed by processing station A on the same day of arrival, it is possible for there to be a delay between an arrival of an item and processing of the item at the processing station A. Thus, it is desirable to provide an arrival date for destination confirmation service, indicating an arrival date for an entire shipment that includes the item being tracked. With this information, the shipping company may provide further features to the subscriber, such as a confirmation that the shipping company has taken possession of a shipment. Further, the shipping company may evaluate this information to build trend and statistical information about the performance of the confirmation service and overall item processing. For example, the shipping company may compare the number of items deposited for processing to the number of items scanned by the confirmation service to determine how many pieces are not properly tracked by the confirmation service. Further, the shipping company may determine the length of time items, in general, take for processing after arrival at the shipping company.

[054] To determine an arrival of an item before physically processing the individual item, the shipping company may receive a file, such as an advance shipping notice (ASN) data file, providing information regarding an anticipated drop date for a shipment including the item. The ASN file may indicate a shipment identification identifying the shipment and a customer identification identifying the customer associated with the shipment, along with other information, such as, for example, an estimated drop date. Thus, when the shipment arrives at a shipping company's facility with a shipment identification barcode on a form accompany the shipment, for example, the shipping company may scan the shipment identification barcode and use the information in the ASN file to link the shipment with a customer before processing an individual item in the shipment. The shipping company may notify the customer when the shipment arrives before processing the item.

[055] In an embodiment of the present invention, the ASN file may be prepared by a sender or by a company on behalf of the sender (i.e., a consolidator). In an embodiment of the present invention, the file may be provided to the shipping company electronically.

[056] In an embodiment of the present invention, the item may be verified at the sender's premises before the shipping company takes possession. During verification, a shipment of items may be weighed to determine the total weight of the items and the required shipping fee or postage, for example. In another embodiment of the present invention, the items may be verified at a facility of the shipping company.

[057] Figs. 11a, 11b, 11c, and 11d are diagrams illustrating various embodiments of advance shipping notice (ASN) data that may be provided in a ASN data file by a subscriber for verified items according to the present invention. The ASN data may include shipment identification 1102, facility code 1104, estimated drop date 1106, estimated drop time 1108, appointment number 1110, subscriber identification 1112, items identification 1114, items name 1116, service code 1118, number second barcodes 1120, total number of items dropped 1122, delivery window start date 1124, delivery window end date 1126, presort level 1128, second barcode 1130, and a number items second barcode coded 1132. The ASN data may be stored in an ASN data file provided electronically by a subscriber to the shipping company.

Alternatively, a hard copy of the file may be provided to the shipping company. In an embodiment of the invention, ASN data file may include a single data file in comma delimited format, each record consisting of the 16 data elements or fields listed above. One skilled in the art, however, recognizes that the present invention is not limited to this data file format. The file may be delimited by tabs or spaces, or the file may include multiple files, for example. Each ASN data film may have one or more shipments, and each shipment may have at least one second barcode.

[058] Shipment identification 1102, facility code 1104, estimated drop date 1106, estimated drop time 1108, and appointment number 1110 are

shipping elements regarding the shipment. Shipment Identification 1102 may be a twenty digit alphanumeric code that uniquely identifies a single shipment or drop. This number is discussed in greater detail below with reference to Fig. 12. Facility code 1104 may be a five digit numeric code that represents a shipping company facility where the shipment is dropped. For example, a zip code of the facility may represent a facility (e.g., Northern Virginia processing and distribution center (P&DC) = 22081). If the shipment is dropped at another facility, the second drop represents a separate shipment that requires another ASN form. Estimated drop date 1106 may include an eight digit numeric code in a format MMDDYYYY that represents a date the item is dropped at the shipping company facility. Estimated drop time 1108 may include a four digit numeric code in a format HHMM that represents a time the shipment is dropped at the shipping company facility. Estimated drop time 1108 may be an optional feature. Appointment number 1110 may include a twelve digit appointment number assigned by a drop ship appointment system (DSAS) that corresponds to the shipment. The appointment number may not be required for all shipments.

[059] Elements related to the item may include subscriber identification 1112, items identification 1114, items name 1116, service code 1118, number second barcodes 1120, total number of items dropped 1122, delivery window start date 1124, delivery window end date 1126, presort level 1128, second barcode 1130, and number of items second barcode coded 1132. Subscriber identification 1112 may include a nine digit numeric subscriber identification assigned by the shipping company. The value assigned by the shipping company may be padded with leading zeros to nine digits. For example, an assigned value "12-345" should be zero padded as "000-012-345."

[060] Items identification 1114 may include an eight digit numeric unique identifier assigned by the customer for the items shipped. The value may be padded with leading zeros to eight digits. Items name 1116 may include a 50 digit alphanumeric items name describing the items shipped.

Service code 1118 may include a two digit numeric service plan identification, similar to service plan 720 or 820 of the second barcode. For example, subscribers for destination confirmation may use numerals 40 to 49 to indicate a particular type of service for the item being tracked, such as "40" for first class letters, "41" for first class flats, "42" for standard letters, "43" for standard flats, "44" for periodicals letters, and "45" for periodical flats, etc.

[061] Number of second barcodes 1120 may include a four digit numeric value representing the number of different second barcode codes the shipment contains. The value may be padded with leading zeros to four digits. Total number of items dropped 1122 may include the total number of items the shipment contains. Delivery window start date 1124 and delivery window end date 1126 each may include an eight digit numeric value in the format MMDDYYYY, representing the first and last day of an in-home delivery window, respectively. An in-home delivery window may represent the sender's desired date range for delivery of the item, for example. Delivery window start date 1124 and delivery window end date 1126 may be included at the option of the sender.

[062] Presort level 1128 may include a three digit numeric value indicating a predominant presort level of items. Presort level may indicate the level that a sender has items sorted on his facilities, rather than the shipping company's facilities, in exchange for reduced rates. For example, senders that pre-sort items at their premises for immediate delivery by the shipping company may receive a deeper discount than senders who provide a primary sortation that requires further sortation by the shipping company. Presort level 1128 may be an optional feature for a sender. Second barcode 1130, which may correspond to second barcode 700 described earlier, may be included as an eleven digit numeric code, i.e., the code without the checksum digit. Although the second barcode has been described as an eleven digit code, one reasonably skilled in the art can recognize that the length of the code may be expanded to 13 digits (plus a checksum digit) to provide enhanced services. Number of items second barcode coded 1132 may

include a nine digit numeric code for identifying the items that are tagged with the second barcode in the shipment. The value may be padded with leading zeros to nine digits.

[063] Fig. 11A shows an exemplary advance shipping notice (ASN) file in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention. ASN file 1100A is an exemplary file representing a single shipment 1134A that is sent to a single shipment company facility 1104. As shown in Fig. 11A, the shipment may include one second barcode "43-123-450-246" (e.g., second barcode 1130) that is associated with 9,900,000 items (e.g., number of items second barcode coded 1132) of the 9,900,000 pieces dropped (e.g., total number of items dropped 1122) for shipment at facility "36106" (e.g., facility code 1104) on May 10, 2001 (e.g., estimated drop date 1106) at 4 p.m (e.g., estimated drop date 1108). The subscriber identification 1112 for the items drop is customer number "12-345."

[064] Fig. 11B shows an exemplary advance shipping notice (ASN) file in accordance with another embodiment of the present invention. ASN file 1100B is an exemplary file representing four shipments each sent to a different shipping company facility 1104. A sender, such as sender 400, may generate a separate record for each facility, such as records 1134B, 1136B, 1138B, and 1140B, associated with shipments 1-4, respectively. The records may be combined into one ASN file 1100B, as shown in Fig. 11B, or the records may be placed in separate files, similar to Fig. 11A. If the records are placed in separate files, number of second barcodes 1120 may change from "0004" to "0001", for example.

[065] Fig. 11B shows each drop may have unique features, such as a separate second barcodes 1132, separate drop date, etc. For example, shipment 4 1140B dropped at facility "36106" (e.g., facility code 1104) has a second barcode "43-123-450-246" (e.g., second barcode 1130), whereas shipment 3 1138B dropped at facility "22042" (e.g., facility code 1104) has a second barcode "43-123-450-247" (e.g., second barcode 1130), for example. Further, the estimated drop date 1106 for shipment 4 1140B dropped at

facility "36106" (e.g., facility code 1104) is a day before the estimated drop date 1106 for shipment 3 1138B dropped at facility "22042" (e.g., facility code 1104), and shipment identification 1102 for shipment 4 differs from shipment identification 1102 for shipment 3. The subscriber identity 1112 for both shipments is customer number "12345."

[066] Fig. 11C shows an exemplary advance shipping notice (ASN) file in accordance with another embodiment of the present invention. ASN file 1100C is an exemplary file representing four shipments sent to the same shipping company facility 1104 from different sending companies. Typically, each sending company may submit a ASN file separately to the shipping company facility 1104, as shown in Fig. 11A, for example. However, in the embodiment depicted in Fig. 11C, a consolidator may group items from separate item producers or senders for a single drop to a specific shipping company facility 1104. Thus, a record associated with each subscriber 1134C, 1136C, 1138C, and 1140C may have a separate second barcode 1132 and subscriber identity 1112, and the same shipment identification 1102, estimated drop date 1106, estimated drop time 1108, and facility code 1104, for example. Also, although ASN file 1100C contains four records, each subscriber shown only has one shipment. Therefore, Fig. 11C correctly shows the number of second barcodes 1120 as 1 for each record 1134C, 1136C, 1138C, and 1140C.

[067] Fig. 11D shows an exemplary advance shipping notice (ASN) file in accordance with yet another embodiment of the present invention. ASN file 1100D is an exemplary file representing four shipments with the same second barcode 1130 that are sent to different shipping company facilities 1104. In this example, each shipment recorded may be a portion of a larger shipment. To utilize a single second barcode on items dropped at multiple locations, a sender may drop items at facilities that serve as a final destination for each item. A sender, such as sender 400, may generate a separate record for each facility, such as records 1134D, 1136D, 1138D, and 1140D,

associated with shipments 1-4, respectively. The records may be combined into one ASN file 1100D, as shown in Fig. 11D.

[068] The present invention is not limited to the embodiments specifically described herein. One reasonably skilled in the art can readily recognize several embodiments of the present invention. For example, in another embodiment, not shown, the shipment may be verified at a shipping company facility, rather than a sender's facility. If the shipment is verified at a shipping company facility, an application of the shipment identification may differ from a shipment identification provided by the sender. For example, the sender may affix a shipment identification barcode on a new form (not shown) that will be presented along with a required shipping fee or postage statement. The other data in the ASN file may remain unchanged from that shown in Fig. 11A, for example.

[069] Fig. 12 is a diagram illustrating an exemplary shipment identification. Shipment identification 1102 may include a start code 1210, service type code 1220, subscriber identification 1230, sequential shipment identification 1240, first check digit 1250, second check digit 1260 and stop code 1270. In an embodiment of the invention, shipment identification 1102 may use a uniform symbology specification (USS) code 128, subset B, which is defined in AIM uniform symbology specifications. Start code 1210 and stop code 1270 may include one digit symbolic codes that begin and end the barcode, respectively. The start code 1210 and stop code 1270 may have a format that is not human readable nor manually keyed or transmitted. Service type code may be a two digit character of UT.

[070] In an embodiment of the present invention, subscriber identification 1230 may include a nine digit numeric value assigned to a subscriber by the shipping company. Specifically, the destination confirmation subscriber identification provided by the shipping company may be padded with leading zeros to nine digits to form subscriber identification 1230. In another embodiment of the present invention, subscriber identification 1230 may include a nine-digit numeric subscriber identification assigned by the

shipping company to a company that creates an ASN file on behalf of a confirmation subscriber (i.e., a consolidator) and subscribers to Confirm®. In still another embodiment of the present invention, subscriber identification 1230 may include a number, such as a nine-digit D-U-N-S number, identifying a company that creates the ASN file on behalf of a confirmation subscriber (i.e., a consolidator). The D-U-N-S number, assigned to a company by Dun & Bradstreet, uniquely identifies business entities at specific physical entities. Thus, a consolidator generating shipments at multiple locations may use the D-U-N-S number appropriate for each shipping location as subscriber identification 1230.

[071] Sequential shipment identification 1240 may include an eight-digit number. Sequential shipment identification 1240 may increase sequentially for each shipment sent by the sender, for example. In an embodiment of the present invention, the value for sequential shipment identification 1240 may remain unique for at least a year.

[072] First check digit 1250 may include a one digit numeric value that is a MOD 10 check digit. To calculate the check digit, numeric values at even and odd positions of shipment code 1220 may be added separately (leaving a value of check digit 1250 as "0"), a value of the even sum may be multiplied by three, and the result may be added to the value of the odd sum to determine a base number. A smallest number that may be added to the base number to produce a multiple of 10 may be the check digit. Even and odd positions of 20-digit shipment identification 1102 may be determined by assigning a position of "1" to the rightmost digit, first check digit 1250, and assigning consecutive position values to the digits to the left, such that the first character "U" of service type code 1220 has a position of "22," because each character (e.g., "U" and "T") is represented numerically using two digits. Particularly, characters of shipment identification 1102 may be converted to numbers using table 2 of the code 128 symbol character found in the AIM uniform symbology specification code 128. For example, the letters "U" and "T" of service type code 1220 have the two digit numerical representations

"53" and "52," respectively. Thus, for the exemplary shipment identification 1102 shown in Fig. 12, adding the even positions (e.g., $5+5+0+0+1+3+5+0+0+1+3$) yields 23, adding the odd positions (e.g., $3+2+0+0+2+4+0+0+0+2+0$ for the check digit) yields 13. Multiplying the even sum by 3 yields and adding the result to the odd sum yields 92. Thus, a value of "8" for first check digit 1250 results in a digit that is a multiple of 10.

[073] Second check digit 1262 may represent a MOD 103 check digit that is unique to the Code 128 symbology. For example, second check digit 1262 may be positioned as the last digit of shipment identification 1102; however, it may have a form that is not human readable, manually keyed, nor transmitted as data. Accordingly, second check digit 1262 may be considered overhead that is not a data element.

[074] Other embodiments of the invention will be apparent to those skilled in the art from consideration of the specification and practice of the invention disclosed herein. It is intended that the specification and examples be considered as exemplary only, with a true scope and spirit of the invention being indicated by the following claims.

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A method for providing tracking information for an item being shipped, associated with a shipping customer, comprising:
 - receiving arrival information from the customer regarding an anticipated arrival of the item, wherein the arrival information includes
 - a predetermined shipment identification identifying an anticipated shipment associated with the item, and
 - a predetermined customer identification identifying the customer;
 - receiving a first shipment with a first shipment identification;
 - comparing the first shipment identification to the predetermined shipment identification; and
 - notifying the customer with confirmed arrival information when the first shipment identification matches the predetermined shipment identification.
2. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
 - processing the item associated with the first shipment; and
 - providing the customer with processing information regarding the item.
3. The method of claim 2, wherein the processing information includes at least one of the following: a code for linking a predetermined customer identification and an identification of the item, a processing date for processing the item, and a location for processing the item.
4. The method of claim 3, wherein the processing information further includes at least one of a processing time for processing the item, and a level of pre-sort for sorting the shipment associated with the item.
5. The method of claim 2, wherein the confirmed arrival information and the processing information are provided to the customer via a website.

6. The method of claim 2, wherein the confirmed arrival information and the processing information are provided to the customer via a file transfer protocol.
7. The method of claim 1, further comprising using a code to uniquely identify the item and associate the item with the customer.
8. The method of claim 7, wherein the code further links the item to a subset of customer gathered data within a database of the customer.
9. The method of claim 7, wherein the code comprises a first type of barcode and a second type of barcode.
10. The method of claim 9, wherein a first symbology of the first type of barcode is inversely related to a second symbology of the second type of barcode.
11. The method of claim 1, wherein the anticipated arrival information is provided electronically by the customer.
12. The method of claim 1, wherein the anticipated arrival information is provided electronically by a company on behalf of the customer.
13. The method of claim 1, wherein the shipping identification further includes a subscriber number and a sequential shipment identification number.
14. The method of claim 1, wherein the anticipated arrival information further includes at least one of:
 - a facility code indicating a receiving facility for the anticipated shipment;
 - an estimated drop date that the anticipated shipment; and
 - an estimated drop time for the anticipated shipment.
15. The method of claim 1, wherein the anticipated arrival information further includes at least one of:
 - an items name providing a description of the anticipated shipment;
 - a service code indicating a level of service for the anticipated shipment;

a total items number indicating a total number of items dropped in the anticipated shipment;

a total track number indicating a total number of items dropped in the anticipated shipment for tracking;

a tracking identification indicating an identification associated with the item; and

a presort level indicating a level of sortation for the anticipated shipment.

16. A method for providing tracking information for an item shipped, associated with a shipping customer, comprising:

- receiving anticipated arrival information from the customer regarding an anticipated arrival of the item, wherein the anticipated arrival information includes
 - a predetermined shipment identification identifying an anticipated shipment associated with the item, and
 - a predetermined customer identification identifying the customer;
- receiving a first shipment with a first shipment identification;
- comparing the first shipment identification to the predetermined shipment identification;
- notifying the customer with confirmed arrival information when the first shipment identification matches the predetermined shipment identification;
- processing the item associated with the shipment; and
- providing the customer with processing information regarding the item.

17. The method of claim 16, wherein the confirmed arrival information and processing information are provided to the customer via a website.

18. The method of claim 16, wherein the confirmed arrival information and processing information are provided to the customer via a file transfer protocol.
19. The method of claim 16, wherein the processing information includes at least one of the following: a code for linking a predetermined customer identification and an identification of the item, a processing date for processing the item, and a location for processing the item.
20. The method of claim 16, further comprising using a code to uniquely identify the item and associate the item with the customer.
21. The method of claim 20, wherein the code further links the item to a subset of customer gathered data within a database of the customer.
22. The method of claim 16, wherein the anticipated arrival information further includes at least one of:
 - a facility code indicating a receiving facility for the anticipated shipment;
 - an estimated drop date that the anticipated shipment; and
 - an estimated drop time for the anticipated shipment.
23. A system for providing tracking information for an item being shipped, associated with a shipping customer, comprising:
 - an anticipated arrival receive component for receiving anticipated arrival information from the customer regarding an anticipated arrival of the item, wherein the anticipated arrival information includes
 - a predetermined shipment identification identifying an anticipated shipment associated with the item, and
 - a predetermined customer identification identifying the customer;
 - a shipment receive component for receiving a first shipment with a first shipment identification;

a comparison component for comparing the first shipment identification to the predetermined shipment identification; and

a notification component for notifying the customer with confirmed arrival information when the first shipment identification matches the predetermined shipment identification.

24. The system of claim 23, further comprising:

an item processing component for processing the item associated with the shipment, wherein said notification component further provides the customer with processing information regarding the item.

25. The system of claim 24, wherein said notification component provides the confirmed arrival information and the processing information via a website.

26. The system of claim 24, wherein said notification component provides the confirmed arrival information and the processing information via a file transfer protocol.

27. The system of claim 23, wherein said notification provides the confirmed arrival information and the processing information electronically.

28. The system of claim 23, wherein said anticipated arrival receive component receives anticipated arrival information electronically from the customer.

29. The system of claim 23, wherein said anticipated arrival receive component receives anticipated arrival information electronically from a company on behalf of the customer.

30. The system of claim 23, wherein the anticipated arrival information further includes at least one of:

a facility code indicating a receiving facility for the anticipated shipment;

an estimated drop date that the anticipated shipment; and
an estimated drop time for the anticipated shipment.

31. The system of claim 23, wherein the anticipated arrival information further includes at least one of:

- an items name providing a description of the anticipated shipment;
- a service code indicating a level of service for the anticipated shipment;
- a total items number indicating a total number of items dropped in the anticipated shipment;
- a total track number indicating a total number of items dropped in the anticipated shipment for tracking;
- a tracking identification indicating an identification associated with the item; and
- a presort level indicating a level of sortation for the anticipated shipment;

32. A system for providing tracking information for an item associated with a customer, comprising:

- a anticipated arrival receive component for receiving pre- arrival information from the customer regarding an anticipated arrival of the item, wherein the anticipated arrival information includes
 - a predetermined shipment identification identifying an anticipated shipment associated with the item, and
 - a predetermined customer identification identifying the customer;
- a shipment receive component for receiving a first shipment with a first shipment identification;
- a comparison component for comparing the first shipment identification to the predetermined shipment identification;

a notification component for notifying the customer with confirmed arrival information when the first shipment identification matches the predetermined shipment identification; and

an item processing component for processing the item associated with the shipment, wherein said notification component further provides the customer with processing information regarding the item.

33. The system of claim 32, wherein said notification component provides the confirmed arrival information and the processing information via a website.
34. The system of claim 32, wherein said notification component provides the confirmed arrival information and the processing information via a file transfer protocol.